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# A SACRIFICE AT PRATO









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AN OLD-FASHIONED NARRATIVE

BY

MAURICE HEWLETT



HILLSIDE PRESS

ENGLEWOOD, NEW JERSEY

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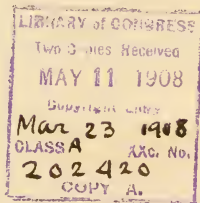
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# ILLUSTRATIONS

FROM DRAWINGS

By WHITMAN BAILEY.

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

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This little narrative, reprinted from "Earth-work Out of Tuscany," is published with the special permission of the author.

Mr. Hewlett himself considers this the best chapter in that interesting work, and so stated in a recent letter to the publisher.

A SACRIFICE AT PRATO

## AUTHOR'S NOTE.

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Perhaps I may be allowed to explain that this article was written from the standpoint of a cultivated Pagan of the Empire, who should have journeyed in Time as well as Space.

M. H.





## A SACRIFICE AT PRATO.

An old-fashioned narrative.

THE rim of the sun was burning the hill tops, and already the vanguard of his strength stemming the morning mists, when I and my companion first trod the dust of a small town which stood in our path. It still lay very hard and white, however, and sharply edged to its girdle of olives and mulberry trees drenched in dews, a compactly folded town well fortified by strong walls and many towers, with the mist upon it and softly over it like a veil. For it lay well under the shade of the hills awaiting the sun's coming. In the streets, though they were by no means asleep, but, contrariwise, busy with the traffic of men and pack-mules,

there was a shrewd bite as of night air; looking up we could perceive how faint the blue of the sky was, and the cloud-flaw how rosy yet with the flush of Aurora's beauty-sleep. Therefore we were glad to get into the market-place, filled with people and set round with goodly brick buildings, and to feel the light and warmth steal about our limbs.

"It would seem fitting," said I, "seeing that day is at hand and already we enjoy the first-fruits of his largess, that we should seek some neighbouring shrine where we might praise the gods. For never yet was land that had not, as its fairest work, gods: and in a land so fair as this there must needs be gods yet fairer, and shrines to case them in." This I said, having observed pious offerings laid upon the shrines of divers gods by the road. At the which, looking curiously, it seemed to me that the inhabitants of this country were favoured above the common with devout thoughts and the objects of them—gods and goddesses. You might not

pass a farm without its tutelary altar to the genius of the place, some holy shade, or—as she was figured as a matron—some great land-goddess, perhaps Cybele, or the Bona Dea; and pleasant it was to me to see that the tufts of common flowers set before her were for the most part smiling and fresh with the dew that assured an early gathering. In the streets of the city, moreover, I had seen many more such, slight affairs (it is true) of painted earthenware, some gaudily adorned with green and yellow colour and of workmanship as raw, some painted flat on the wall of a recess (in which was more skill, though the device was often gross enough—to dwell upon death and despair), and some again of choice beauty, both of form and colour, and a most rare blitheness, as it might be the spirit of the contrivers breaking through the hard stone. And all of these I knew to be gods, but the devices upon them were hard to be read, or approved. There was a naked youth pierced with

arrows, wherein the texture of smooth flesh accorded not well with the bitterness of his hurt; a young man also, bearded, of spare and mournful habit and girt with a rope round his middle; in his hands were wounds, as again of arrows, and there was a rent in his garment where a javelin had torn a way into his side. Such suffering of wounds and broken flesh stared sharply up against the young flowers and grasses which spoke of healthy wind and rain and a sun-kissed earth. Goddesses also I saw—a virgin of comely red and white visage; yellow-haired she was, crowned like a king's daughter; at her side a wheel, cruelly spiked on the outer edge and not easily to be related to so heart-some a maid. But before them all (with one grim exception, to be sure) I saw the Earth-Mother who had been upon the farm and homestead-walls, of the same high perfection of form, and in raiment stately and adorned, yet (it would seem) something sorrowful as she might mourn the loss of

lover or young child. Now the darkest sight I saw was that exception before rehearsed ; and it was this. A black cross stood in the most joyful places of the city, and one suffered upon it to very death. Whereat I marvelled greatly, saying, "Who is the man thus tormented whom the people worship as a god?" And my companion answered,

"A great god he is, if the country report lie not, and has many names which amount to this, that he has freed this nation from bondage and died that he may live again, and they too. And of the truth of what they say I cannot speak ; but I think he is Bacchus the Redeemer, who, as you, Balbus, know, was no wanton reveller in lasciviousness, but a very god of great benevolence and of wisdom truly dark and awful. Who also took our mortal nature upon him and suffered in the shades : rising whence (for he was god and man) like the dawn from the night's bosom, or the flooding of spring weather from the iron gates of winter, he sped over

land and sea, touching earth and the dwellers upon it. And to those he touched tongues were given and soothsaying, and to many the transports of inspiration and divine madness, as of poets and rhapsodists. And tragedy and choral odes are his, and the furious splendour of dances. But of the worship of Dionysus you know something, having been at Eleusis and beheld the holy mysteries.

“Now the god of this people has the same gift of tongues and madness of possession. To him are also sacred priests of the oracle, and high tragedies, and the wailing of music, and streaming processions of virgins and young boys. He too agonised and arose stronger and more shining than before, dying, indeed, and rising at the very vernal equinox we have mentioned. He too is worshipped in certain Mysteries whereat the confession of iniquity and the cleansing of hearts come first: and the sacrifice is just that wheaten cake and fruit of the vine whereof, at

Eleusis, you have praised to me the simplicity and ethic beauty. And he can inspire his devotees with frenzy. For I have heard that certain men of the country, on a day, and urged by his daemon, run naked from place to place in honour of him, lashing their bare backs with ox-goads; and will fast by the week together, they and the women alike; and that pious virgins, under stress of these things, swoon and are floated betwixt earth and heaven, and afterwards relate their blissful encounters and prophesy strange matters; receiving also dolorous wounds (which nevertheless are very sweet to them) like to the wounds which he himself received unto death; and all these things they endure because they are mystically fraught with the wisdom and efficacy of the god. Nay, I have been told that in the parts over sea, towards the North and West, he is worshipped, just as at Eleusis, with pipes and timbrels and brazen cymbals and all excess of music; and there they dance in

his service and suffer the ecstasies of the Maenads and Corybants in the Dionysiac revel. But this I find quaint to be believed."

Now when I had heard so much, I was the more desirous to find some temple where I could observe the cult of this wounded god, and so sought counsel of my friend versed in the people's learning. To my questioning he replied that it would be easy. We were (said he) in the market-place among the buyers and chafferers of fruit, vegetables, earthenware, milk, eggs, and such country produce; which honest folk, it being the hour of the morning sacrifice and the temple facing us, would soon abandon their brisk toil for religion's sake; whereupon we too would go. So I looked across the square and saw a very fair building, lofty and many windowed, all of clean white marble, banded over with bars of a smooth black stone, curiously carved, moreover, in sculptured work of gods and men and of flowers and fruits—all cut in the pure marble. At one



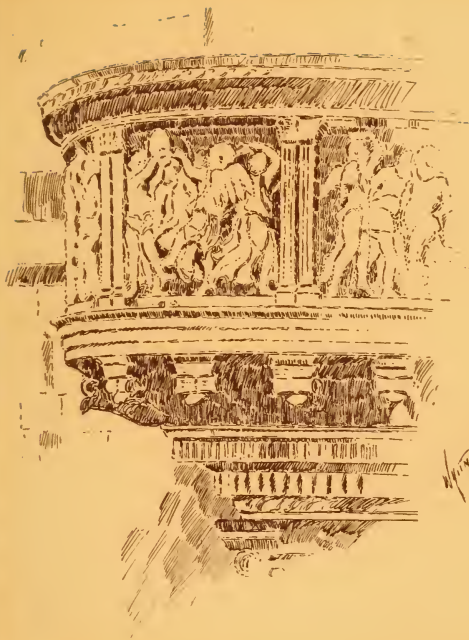


OUTDOOR PULPIT BY DONATELLO  
(ON THE FACADE OF THE CATHEDRAL)

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Now when I had heard so much, I was the more desirous to find some temple where I could observe the cult of this wounded god, and we sought counsel of my friend versed in the people's learning. To my questioning he replied that it would be easy. We went (said he) in the market-place among the buyers and chaffers of fruit, vegetables, earthenware, milk, eggs, and such country produce, which honest folk, it being the hour of the morning sacrifice and the temple facing us, would soon abandon their brisk talk for religious awe; whereupon we too would go. So I looked across the square and saw a very fine building, lofty and many windowed, all of creamy white marble, banded over with tiers of a smooth black stone, curiously carved moreover, in sculptured work of all kinds, of flowers and fruits—all cut in the pure marble. At one

OUTDOOR PULPIT BY DONATELLO  
(ON THE FACADE OF THE CATHEDRAL)



Wm. Bury 7.



side was a noble rostrum, of the like fine stone, whereon young boys and girls, as it were fauns and dryads and other woodland creatures, capered as they list: and above the midmost door a semi-circle of pale blue enamel, whereon was the image of the Great Goddess in gleaming white. She was of smiling debonnair countenance and in the full pride of her blossom-time — being as a young woman whose girdle is new loosed to the will of her lord — and in her arms was a naked child, finely wrought to the size of life. On either side of her a beautiful youth (in whom I must needs admire the smoothness of their chins and the bravery of their vesture shining in the clear light), did reverence to the Goddess and the child: and there were beings, winged like birds, with the faces of strong boys, but no bodies at all that I could see, who flew above them all. This was brave work, very wonderful to me in a people who, thus excellently inspired and having such comely smiling divinities

and so clear a vision of them before their eyes, could yet be curious after suffering heroes and stabbed virgins and gods with mangled limbs. But we went into the temple with the good people of the country-side to the sound of bells from a high tower hard by. And I was something surprised that they brought no beasts with them for the sacrifice, nor any of the fruits which were so abundant in the land; but my companion reminded me again that the sacrifice was ready prepared within, and was, as it were, emblematical of all fruits and every sort of meat, being that wine and bread into which you may comprehend all bodily and (by a figure) ghostly sustenance. By this we were within the temple, which I now perceived was a pantheon, having altars to all the gods, some only of whose shrines I had remarked on the way thither. Dark and lofty it was, with pined arches that soared into the mist, and jewelled windows painfully worked in histories and fables of old

time — all as far apart as conceivably might be from the holy places of my own country ; for whereas, with us, the level gaze of the sun is never absent, and through the colonnades you would see stretches of the far blue country, or, perchance, the shimmer of the restless sea, here no light of day could penetrate, and all the senses might apprehend must be of solemn darkness, longing thoughts to cleave it, and, afar off and dim, some flutter of even light as of blest abodes. A strange people ! to despise the sure and fair, for the taunting shadows of desire. But, growing more familiar in the middle of newness and the awe that comes of it, I was again amazed at the number of the gods, their nature and sort. I saw again the arrow-stricken youth, whom we call Asclepius (but never knew thus tormented—as with his father's arrows !) and again the Maid of the Wheel, Fortune as I suppose : but with us the wheel is not so manifestly bitter. Then also the wounded hero, cowed and


corded, ragged exceedingly, the like of whom we have not, unless it be some stripling loved by an immortal and wounded to death by grudging Fate, as Atys or Adonis. And if, indeed, this were one of them, the image-maker did surely err in making him of so vile a presence—a thing against all likelihood that the gods, being themselves of super-excellent shapeliness, should stoop to anything of less favour. Yet he was of singular sweetness in his pains, and high fortitude: and he was much loved of the people, as I afterwards learned. And one was a young knight, winged and with a sword in his hand; at his feet a grievous worm of many folds. This I must take for Perseus but that his radiancy did rather point him for Phoebus, the lord of days and the red sun. But in the centre of the whole temple was an altar, high and broad, fenced about with steps and a rail, which I took to be made unto the god of gods or perhaps the king of that country, until I saw the black cross and



the Agonist hanging from it as one dead. Then I knew that the chief god of this people was Dionysus the Redeemer, if it were really he. But I had reason to alter my opinion on that matter as you shall hear.

By this the temple was filled with the country folk who flocked in with the very reek of their toil upon them and hardly so much as their implements and marketable wares left behind. They were of all ages and conditions, both youths and maids, arrowy, tall, and open-eyed; and aged ones there were, bowed by labour and seamed with the stress of weather or the assaults of unstaying Fate: whereof, for the most part, the women sat down against the wall and plied dextrously their fans; but the men stood leaning against the pillars which held the timbers of the roof. And they conversed easily together, and some were merry, and others, as I could perceive, beset with affairs of government or business—for they talked more vehemently of these matters than of

others, as men will, even beneath the very eyelids of the god. And so I could understand that this sacrifice was not the yearly celebrating of high mysteries, but the common piety of every day with which it is rather seemly than essential we should begin our labouring. There were, indeed, signs in the apparelling of the temple that more solemn festivals were sometimes held, as the delivery of oracles, the calculation of auspices and such like: that, at least, I took to be the intention of small recesses along the walls, that, through a grating of fine brass, a priest of the sanctuary uttered the wisdom of the god in sentences which the meaner sort should fit with what ease they might to their circumstances. For, I suppose, it is still found good that the dark saying of the Oracle should be illumined by the subtlety of the initiate and not by the necessities of the simple. And while I was thus musing I found the ministrants in shining white about the great altar, busied



MADONNA AND CHILD — LUNETTE BY  
ANDREA DELLA ROBIA — OVER  
THE PRINCIPAL ENTRANCE

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with the preparation for the rite, lighting the torches (very inconsiderable for so large a building, but, mayhap, proportionate to the condition of the people): and they placed a great book upon the altar, and bowed themselves ere they left. And soon afterwards, to the ringing of a bell, came the priest's boy carrying the offering of the altar, and the priest himself in stiff garments of white and yellow.

Now, for the sacrifice, I could not well understand it, save that it was very shortly done and with a light heart accepted by the people, who (I thought) held it as of the number of those services whose bare performance is efficacious and wholesome—on account, partly of reverent antiquity and long usage, and partly as having some hidden virtue best known to the god in whose honour it is done. For in my own country, I know well, there were many such rites, whose commission edified the people more than their omission would have dishonoured

the god: wise men, therefore (as priests and philosophers), who would live in peace, bow their bodies by rule, knowing surely that their souls may be bolt upright notwithstanding. So here were many solemn acts which, doubtless, once had some now unfathomable design and purport, diligently rehearsed, while the worshippers gazed about with dull unconcern, or, being young, cast eyes of longing upon the country wench-  
es set laughing and rosy by the wall, or, old, nursed their infirmities. And, on a sudden, a bell rang; and again rang; and the packed body of men and women fell upon their faces, and so remained in a horrific silence for a space where a man might count a score. Thereafter another bell, as of release. So the assembly rose to their feet and, as I saw, swept from their foreheads and breasts the dust of the temple floor. But as soon as it was over, a very old priest came through the press and offered the same sacrifice in a little guarded shrine at the lower end, amid many



lamps and wax torches and glittering ornaments. Here was more devotion among the people, indeed a great struggling and elbowing just so as to touch the altar, or the steps of it, or the priest's hem, or even the rails which fenced the shrine. And with some show of good reason was this hubbub, as I learned. For here was indeed treasured the Girdle of Venus (this being her very sanctuary) and as much desired as ever it was by women great with child or wanting to conceive. And I looked very curiously upon it, but the Girdle I could never see; only there was a painted image over the altar of the great queen-mother, Venus Genetrix herself, depicted as a broad-browed, placid matron giving of the fruits of her bounteous breasts to a male child. Then I knew that this was that same Goddess who stood over the outer door of the place, and was well pleased to find that the people, howsoever ignorantly, adored the power that enwombs the world,—Venus, the life-bringer and quickener of

things that breathe,—and could, in this matter, touch hearts with the wise. So with this thought, that truly God was one and men divers, I came out of the temple well pleased, into the level light of the day's beam.

In the tavern doorway, under a bush of green ilex, we sat down in company to eat bread and peaches sopped in the wine of the country, and talked very briskly of all the things we had seen and heard. And soon into the current of our discourse was drawn a dark-faced youth, who had been observing us earnestly for some time from under his hanging brows, and who, growing mighty curious (as I find the way of them is), must know who and whence we were and of what belief and condition in the world. So when I had satisfied him, "Turn for turn," said I, "my honest friend: being strangers, as you have learned, we have seen many things which touch us nearly, and some which are hard of reading. But this very reading is to us of high concernment, for

these matters relate to religion, and religion, of what sort soever it may be, no man can venture to despise. For certain I am, that, as a man hath never seen the gods, so he may never be sure that he hath ever conceived them, even darkly, as in a mirror. For we are dwellers in a cave, my friend, with our backs to the light, and may not tell of a truth whether the shadows that flit and fade be indeed gods or no. Tell me, therefore, (for I am puzzled by it), is the goddess whose presentment I yet see over your temple-porch, that Mother of gods and men, yea, even Mother of life itself, to whom we also bend the neck?"

"She is, sir, as we believe, Mother of God; and therefore, God being author of life, Mother of life and all things living."

"It is as I had believed," said I, "and you, young sir, and I, may bow together in that temple of hers without offence. For the temple is to her honour as I conceive?"

"Why, yes," he answered, "it is raised to her most holy name and to that of our Lord."

"And your Lord, who is this? and which altar is his? For there are many."

"The great altar is his, and indeed he is to be worshipped in all," said the young man.

"He is then the tortured god, whose semblance hangs upon the black cross?"

"He is."

Then I begged him to tell me why these mournful images were scattered over his goodly earth, these maimed gods, this blood and weeping; but I may not set down all that he told me, seeing that much of it was dark, and much, as I thought, not pertinent to the issue. Much again was said with his hands, which I cannot interpret here. Suffice it that I learned this concerning the Agonist, that he was the son of the goddess and greater than she, though in a sense less. Mortal he was, and immortal, abject to look upon, being indeed accounted a malefactor



BRONZE CRUCIFIX OVER THE HIGH ALTAR

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**BRONZE CRUCIFIX OVER THE HIGH ALTAR**







and crucified like a thief; and yet a king of men, speaking wisdom whereof the like hath hardly been heard. For of two things he taught there would seem to be no bottom to them, so profound and unsearchable they are. And one of them was this,—“The kingdom is within you” (or some such words); and the other was, “Who will lose his life shall save it.” Whereof, methinks, the first comprehends all the teaching of the Academy and the second that of the Porch. So this man must needs have been a god, and whether the son or no of the Soul of the World, greater than she. For what she did, as it were by necessity and her blind inhering power, he KNEW. Therefore he must have been Wisdom itself. And thus I knew that he could not be Dionysus the Saviour, though he might have many of his attributes; nor simply that son of Venus whom Ausonius alone of our poets saw fastened to a cross. So at last, “I will tell you,” said I, “who this god really is, as it seems to me.

Being of vile estate and yet greatest of all; being mortal and yet immortal, god and man; being at once most wise and most simple, and (as such his condition imports) intermediate between Earth and Heaven, he must needs be the Divine Eros, concerning whom Plato's words are yet with us. So I can understand why he is so wise, why he suffers always, and yet cannot be driven by torment nor persuaded by sophisms to cease loving. For the necessity of love is to crave ever; and he is Love himself. Wherefore I am very sure he can lead men, if they will, from the fair things of the world to those infinitely fairer things in themselves whereby what we now have are so very fair to see. And he may well be son of this goddess and nourished by her milk; for it behoves us that a god should stand between Earth and Heaven and be compact of the elements of either, so that he should condescend the wisdom of his head to instruct the clemency of his heart. And we know, you

and I, that the gods are but attributes of God, whose intellect (as I say) may well be in Heaven, but his heart is in the Earth, and is the core of it. For so we say of the poet that his heart is ever in his fair work."

Thus we took our wine and were well content to sit in the sunshine.



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